Introduction

The complex, intertwined history of cats and humankind is believed to stretch back at least ten thousand years.

When peripatetic hunter-gathering societies gradually shifted towards arable farming and more permanent settlements, one of the many advantages was the ability to store food for longer and in greater quantities than before. Such a change presented fresh challenges, however, one of which – vermin – could mean the difference between life and death, particularly during the harsh months of winter.

Mice and rats thrived where grain and other crops were stored, but help was at hand. Cats, drawn by a plentiful supply of food, inadvertently aided humans by ridding them of these pests; in turn, grateful farmers provided board and lodging for their feline saviours, and an alliance based on mutual interest was born. The cat, which even then knew when it was onto a good thing, has maintained this relationship ever since.

It is generally believed that domestication of the cat – *Felis catus* – first occurred in the Fertile Crescent, an area encompassing parts of West Asia such as Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt – the very area in which humankind itself is believed to have originated. From here the cat soon spread – through trade, human movement and natural roaming – and today, Antarctica is the only continent in the world to not have a domestic cat presence of some kind.

Throughout this long and chequered history, cats have been revered as deities, persecuted as witches and demons, and are the subject of countless myths and legends, superstitions and beliefs. Cats are one of the most popular pets worldwide, coming second only to the faithful dog, and whether a cat lover or hater, it is rare to find someone entirely indifferent to their presence. Indeed, they are so beloved by humankind that there is even a word for a love or great fondness of cats: ailurophilia.

This book is an exploration of the varied and often strange ways in which cats are represented within folklore across the globe. The aim is both to celebrate these marvellous creatures, and also to bring us to a closer understanding not only of cats, but also of humankind as a whole and the world that we share with our feline companions.

Note: It is important to note that, throughout history, there have been many beliefs that have led to cruel and brutal treatment of cats and animals in general. While some mention of such practices is unavoidable, they are not the focus of this book and references to animal cruelty will be kept to a minimum.

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